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Wednesday, 24 August 2005, 10 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Oshima	(Japan)
Members:	Algeria	Mr. Benmehidi
	Argentina	Mr. Mayoral
	Benin	Mr. Zinsou
	Brazil	Mr. Sardenberg
	China	Mr. Cheng Jingye
	Denmark	Mr. Faaborg-Andersen
	France	Mr. Poirier
	Greece	Mr. Vassilakis
	Philippines	Mr. Baja
	Romania	Mr. Dumitru
	Russian Federation	Mr. Konuzin
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Johnston
	United Republic of Tanzania	Mr. Mahiga
	United States of America	Mr. Bolton

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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05-47067 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President: In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Ibrahim Gambari, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

It is so decided.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Ibrahim Gambari, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, on whom I now call.

Mr. Gambari: Israeli disengagement from Gaza and northern parts of the West Bank, which began on 15 August as announced, overshadowed other Middle East issues in the past month. Despite the dramatic scenes, which we have all seen on television and in newspapers, of Israeli military and police personnel removing settlers from their houses in Gaza, the operation mostly proceeded smoothly and with surprising speed, aided by the restraint generally observed by militant Palestinian factions. The evacuation of Israeli settlers from Gaza was completed on Monday. Evacuation of settlers from the settlements earmarked for removal in the northern West Bank was carried out yesterday. However, the success of the implementation of the operation was marred by the senseless and unprovoked murders of Palestinians, before and during the disengagement, by what Prime Minister Sharon himself has described as Jewish terrorists in the West Bank.

Quartet envoys met last week in Jerusalem to assess the situation and to prepare for the Quartet principals' meeting, which is due to take place on 20 September here at United Nations Headquarters. While the settlers will long since have been evacuated by that time, Israeli military personnel will almost certainly still be in the Gaza Strip, discharging the tasks that remain to be carried out before they withdraw completely, hopefully some time in October. The Secretary-General looks forward to the opportunity to assess with his Quartet partners the progress of withdrawal, as well as to discuss the issues that will be left pending in connection with withdrawal, as outlined by Mr. James Wolfensohn, the Quartet's special envoy for disengagement. The Quartet will also have an opportunity to chart the next steps in pursuance of the vision to which the Quartet remains committed, namely, that of two States, Israel and a sovereign, viable, democratic and contiguous Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.

In four trips to the region before the start of disengagement, Mr. Wolfensohn continued to focus his efforts on resolving six key issues. Those issues are border crossings and trade corridors linking Gaza and the West Bank, movement within the West Bank, the Gaza airport and seaport, the houses in Israeli settlements and the greenhouses in the settlements. On all those issues, coordination between the Israeli and Palestinian sides intensified in the last month and continues to this day. Members of the Council will agree that since those matters are still under discussion, it would not be wise to air them publicly at this time, lest the outcome be jeopardized.

Also with regard to disengagement, on the night of 15 August Prime Minister Sharon delivered a prime time televised address to his people expressing his regret that "changing reality in this country, in this region and in the world" required a reassessment and change of position —because, according to him, "Gaza cannot be held onto forever". In that regard, he alluded to the growth of the Palestinian population there and to their living "in incredibly cramped refugee camps, in poverty and squalor, in hotbeds of ever-increasing hatred, with no hope whatsoever on the horizon".

Israeli soldiers then began operations to remove settlers from Gaza settlements, once the 15 August deadline for settlers to leave had expired. Opponents of the withdrawal have not succeeded in blocking it. The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and the Israeli police have carried out the operation efficiently, taking pains to avoid the use of force. They have completed the evacuation of the settlements well in advance of the targeted date.

For its part, the Palestinian Authority renewed its commitment to a smooth and peaceful withdrawal and

to cooperate and coordinate with the Israeli side to that end. On 9 August President Abbas told the Palestinian Legislative Council that "a successful withdrawal and maintaining security is the responsibility of all Palestinians, so that we can show the world we deserve our freedom and our independence". On 14 August a large force of Palestinian police began to deploy in several areas of the Gaza Strip adjacent to Jewish settlements to provide buffer cordons and to deter the firing of home-made rockets and mortars. The Palestinian side's cooperation has been manifest throughout the evacuation.

With regard to security and violence, I would like to report that a spate of kidnappings of foreigners in the Gaza Strip over past months reflects a decline in the internal security situation during the run-up to disengagement. It also illustrates the breadth of the security problem, which extends beyond armed factions to other family-controlled armed groups.

The President of the Palestinian Authority, other high-level officials and community leaders have condemned the kidnappings. The United Nations has therefore been compelled to increase security measures, but the critical humanitarian, emergency and security staff of the United Nations remain in Gaza and all operations and the delivery of services continue unchanged. It is hoped that the Palestinian Authority will implement promised changes and enhancements in the internal security arrangements without any further delay.

On the other hand, the renewed commitment to the ceasefire by Palestinian armed groups has led to a significant reduction in the number of Palestinian attacks on Israeli targets inside the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel, and it facilitated the smooth implementation of the disengagement from Gaza.

United States Security Coordinator General Ward continued his assistance to the Palestinian Authority in putting together the necessary resources to ensure that disengagement went smoothly. There will be a continuing need for international assistance so that over time the goal of a robust Palestinian security sector that ensures that the "one authority, one weapon" policy can be realized.

Amongst the killings in the past month, two incidents were particularly shocking because they took place in the period immediately prior to, and during, the Israeli disengagement. On 4 August, an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldier who had deserted from the army to protest the disengagement opened fire on the passengers of a civilian bus in the Arab town of Shfa'Amr, killing four people and injuring at least 12 other passengers.

In a reminiscent act of terror, on 17 August an Israeli killed four Palestinians and wounded two others when he opened fire on a group of Palestinians in the industrial area of the West Bank settlement of Shiloh. The acts in themselves were utterly horrendous and inexcusable. However, those extremists who have used inflammatory language bordering on incitement carry a heavy responsibility for creating the atmosphere in which the attacks took place.

Thus, while Israel's bold first withdrawal from occupied Palestinian territory is welcome, the situation elsewhere in the occupied Palestinian territory continues to fester, with many Palestinians fearing that Israel is consolidating its occupation in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Of concern in that connection are recent statements by Hamas leaders that they will carry their resistance to the West Bank.

In our view, violence as a means to achieve any objective should be rejected. At the same time, it would be unwise to lose sight of the concern of mainstream Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank that their legitimate aspirations may be put off indefinitely.

With regard to settlement activity, reports by non-governmental monitoring groups indicate that settlement activity in the West Bank continued during the past month. The Ministry of Housing and Construction has issued tenders for the building of 235 housing units in settlements this year, the majority of which are for location in settlements near metropolitan Jerusalem. On 4 August 2005, the Housing Ministry also issued two tenders for the building of 72 housing units in the settlement of Betar Ilit, which is situated between Jerusalem and the Etzion bloc of settlements in the southern West Bank. In Jerusalem, on 25 July 2005, the Israeli local planning committee of the Jerusalem municipality approved a scheme presented by the Ministry of Housing to construct a new Jewish settlement in the Muslim quarter of Jerusalem's Old City.

In late July 2005, the economic ministerial committee of the Knesset approved a three-year aid

plan to provide 97 million shekels to improve infrastructure, agriculture and settlement expansion in the Jordan Valley area. The project is to be carried out in cooperation with the settlement councils in the area and with the Ministries of Housing and of Finance.

It was reported in the Israeli press that Prime Minister Sharon, in a speech last Sunday, confirmed his intention to continue building in the settlement blocs in the West Bank, ensuring a permanent territorial link between Israel and the Ariel settlement and also uniting the settlement of Ma'aleh Adumim with Jerusalem.

With regard to the issue of barrier construction, settlement expansion cannot be separated from the ongoing construction of Israel's security barrier. Last month, my colleague Alvaro de Soto, the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, reported the approval by the Israeli Cabinet of the remaining details of the route of the barrier around Jerusalem, to be completed in September.

This week, land expropriation orders for approximately 396 acres were issued in the Jerusalem governorate. The orders are for the construction of a portion of the already approved barrier around the Ma'aleh Adumim settlement. That route would cut a reported 23 kilometres into occupied Palestinian territory, and would separate the northern West Bank from the south. Confiscation of land and barrier construction continued during the past month throughout the West Bank.

Furthermore, partly as a consequence of continued barrier construction, which rendered them redundant, there has been a significant reduction of roadblocks and earth mounds in the West Bank. No change in the number of checkpoints was noted, while a significant increase has been noted in the number of mobile, sporadic controls by IDF personnel in military vehicles, known as flying checkpoints. Severe limitations remain on Palestinian movement, and it has yet to be seen whether the reductions significantly palliate the damage that the closure regime inflicts on the depressed Palestinian economy and humanitarian conditions.

Following the 12 July suicide bombing in Netanya, a general closure on the occupied Palestinian territory was imposed by the IDF. Workers and merchants from the West Bank were unable to reach their places of work in East Jerusalem and Israel. The closure is still imposed on the West Bank but was eased for several days for Gaza Strip workers and merchants travelling to Israel, only to be imposed again on 13 August due to the disengagement. Movement of Palestinian males aged between 16 and 35 years through Rafah terminal is permitted only with advance coordination.

I would now like to turn to the issue of elections. President Abbas signed the amendments made to the Palestinian Basic Law on 14 August, pursuant to the amendments to the electoral law adopted by the Palestinian Legislative Council in June. The President recently decreed that the legislative elections would be held on 25 January 2006. The amended law stipulates that the term of the President of the Palestinian Authority is four years. It also stipulates that Palestinian Legislative Council elections will be held every four years.

For its part, the Central Elections Commission has said that it is ready to carry out the legislative election accordingly, in January 2006. The Commission affirmed that is has approved all plans and all arrangements for the electoral campaigns and voting. It also affirmed that more than 80 per cent of eligible voters have registered to vote.

Mobile registration teams have so far registered a total of roughly 90,000 new electors. It is expected that the total number of electors will slightly exceed 1.3 million. The Central Elections Commission is also moving forward with voter education plans related to the new law, especially the new system of representation.

I understand that Council members would like to have a briefing on Lebanon, and that is why I now turn my attention to the situation there. We see that there have been several important developments since the last briefing to the Council.

The security situation in Lebanon continues to be unstable. On 22 August 2005 another explosion occurred in Beirut, injuring several people and causing extensive material damage to buildings in the Zalka suburb. The Secretary-General strongly condemned that act of terrorism. He further supports the efforts of the Government of Lebanon to improve the security situation in the country and that Government to bring to justice to those behind that and other similar acts. The Secretary-General also reiterates his call upon all

parties to continue to work towards a united, sovereign and democratic Lebanon.

On 30 July, the proposed Government of Prime Minister Fuad Siniora received a parliamentary vote of confidence, formally establishing the new Government. The Secretary-General welcomed that important development and the new Government's policy statement, which outlined a number of very challenging yet essential reforms for the country. Shortly after the vote of confidence, the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General for Southern Lebanon, Geir Pedersen, called on senior Government officials, including the President, the Prime Minister and the Speaker, reiterating that the United Nations looked forward to working closely with the new Government, and offering it the assistance of the United Nations, as may be required.

In his discussions with the Government, Mr. Pedersen underscored the importance of beginning a process of planning for the further deployment of the Lebanese Army throughout southern Lebanon, in accordance with the various Security Council resolutions to that effect. The UNIFIL Force Commander, Major General Alain Pellegrini, also met recently with Lebanese leaders. He emphasized the need to uphold the current calm along the Blue Line and to avoid any provocations, especially given the current critical period for the region due to the Gaza disengagement.

On 8 August the Lebanese Government announced the creation of a committee headed by a widely respected Lebanese official, former Foreign Minister Fouad Boutros, to oversee the discussions on the reform of the parliamentary electoral law. We view that as a positive indication of the Government's determination to begin a series of important reform-oriented initiatives for the benefit of all Lebanese. Again, the United Nations and the international community stand ready to support the Government of Lebanon in that regard, as and if requested.

On 29 July the Security Council adopted resolution 1614 (2005), which extended the peacekeeping mandate of UNIFIL by a further six months. Since our last briefing to the Council, the situation along the Blue Line has remained calm but tense. Israeli air violations of the Blue Line and Lebanese airspace have continued, if in reduced numbers.

Israeli disengagement from Gaza and the northern West Bank marks a watershed in that it constitutes the first removal by Israel of settlements on occupied Palestinian territory. Israeli policy has demonstrated that it has the requisite maturity to do what will be required to achieve lasting peace, and the Israel Defense Forces have demonstrated their ability to discharge their mission with carefully calibrated restraint. Prime Minister Sharon should be commended for his determination and courage to carry out the disengagement in the face of forceful and often strident internal opposition.

Under the leadership of President Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinians are soberly welcoming this important stage in their history. His continued leadership will be needed at a time of rising expectations in Gaza and mounting concerns in the West Bank. We call on all Palestinian factions to eschew violence and pursue their goals through peaceful and democratic means.

While substantial progress has been made in addressing the priority issues earmarked by Mr. Wolfensohn in the framework of disengagement, much work remains to be done and will be required to reach agreement on them. Mr. Wolfensohn has stressed the need to bring about agreement and implementation in order to provide hope and security for the Palestinians and the Israelis. It is critical to concentrate efforts on the revitalization of the Palestinian economy, which has suffered so greatly in recent years.

However, in the aftermath, the picture appears less clear. Real and difficult challenges still lie ahead in forging common ground among the Israelis and the Palestinians as true peace partners.

In conclusion, I would like to say that neither party should be exempt from its road map obligations. President Abbas must take up the difficult challenge of transforming and developing the security sector and must ensure that the Palestinian Authority holds the monopoly on the use of force. We believe that in facing that challenge, President Abbas will need all possible support from his own people, as well as from Israel and the international community. For its part, Israel should freeze all settlement activities in the West Bank. The creation of new facts on the ground, which prejudice final status issues, can but make the search for negotiated solutions far more difficult than it already is.

Therefore, as the disengagement draws to an end, attention must now turn to the aftermath — the so-called day after. It is hoped that this will be at the top of the Quartet's agenda next month. In our view, it will be necessary to bring the process back into the mainstream, which is laid out in the road map, in order to revitalize and realize the vision of two States living alongside each other and to achieve a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the region.

The President: I thank Mr. Gambari for his comprehensive briefing.

In accordance with the understanding in the Council's prior consultations, I should now like to invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.40 a.m.